Coordinates: 35°08′04″N 90°03′27″W

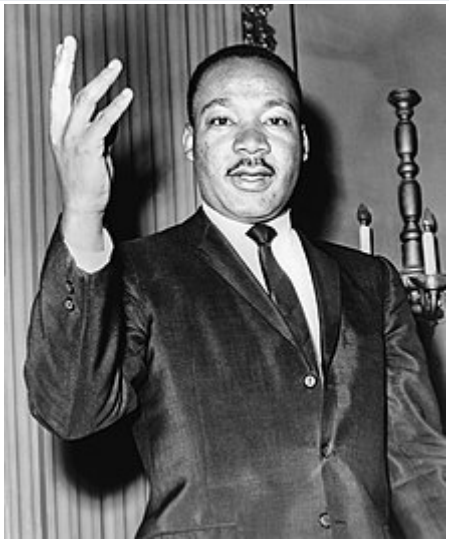
Assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.

Martin Luther King Jr., an American clergyman and civil rights leader, was fatally shot at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee, on April 4, 1968, at 6:01 p.m. CST. He was rushed to St. Joseph's Hospital, where he died at 7:05 p.m. He was a prominent leader of the Civil Rights Movement and a Nobel Peace Prize laureate who was known for his use of nonviolence and civil disobedience.

James Earl Ray, a fugitive from the Missouri State Penitentiary, was arrested on June 8, 1968, in London at Heathrow Airport, extradited to the United States, and charged with the crime. On March 10, 1969, he pleaded guilty and was sentenced to 99 years in the Tennessee State Penitentiary.[1] He later made many attempts to withdraw his guilty plea and be tried by a jury, but was unsuccessful; he died in prison in 1998.[2]

The King family and others believe the assassination was the result of a conspiracy involving the U.S. government, Mafia and Memphis police, as alleged by Loyd Jowers in 1993. They believe that Ray was a scapegoat. In 1999, the family filed a wrongful death lawsuit against Jowers for the sum of $10 million. During closing arguments, their attorney asked the jury to award damages of $100, to make the point that "it was not about the money." During the trial, both sides presented evidence alleging a government conspiracy. The government agencies accused could not defend themselves or respond because they were not named as defendants. Based on the evidence, the jury concluded Jowers and others were "part of a conspiracy to kill King" and awarded the family $100.[3][4] The allegations and the finding of the Memphis jury were later rejected by the United States Department of Justice in 2000 due to lack of evidence.[5]

Assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.



King in 1964

Location	Lorraine Motel Memphis, Tennessee
Coordinates	35°08′04″N 90°03′27″W
Date	April 4, 1968 6:01 p.m. (CST (UTC–6))
Target	Martin Luther King Jr.
Attack type	Sniper assassination
Weapons	Remington 760 Gamemaster .30-06
Deaths	Martin Luther King Jr.
Perpetrators	▪ James Earl Ray according to a criminal case ▪ Loyd Jowers and "others, including unspecified governmental agencies" according to a later civil case

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Background

King on death

As early as the mid-1950s, King had received death threats due to his prominence in the Civil Rights Movement. He had confronted the risk of death, including a nearly fatal stabbing in 1958, and made its recognition part of his philosophy. He taught that murder could not stop the struggle for equal rights. After the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963, King told his wife, Coretta Scott King, "This is what is going to happen to me also. I keep telling you, this is a sick society."[6][7]

Memphis

King traveled to Memphis, Tennessee, in support of striking African American city sanitation workers. The workers had staged a walkout on February 11, 1968, to protest unequal wages and working conditions imposed by then-mayor Henry Loeb. At the time, Memphis paid black workers significantly lower wages than white workers. There were no city-issued uniforms, no restrooms, no recognized union, and no grievance procedure for the numerous occasions on which they were underpaid. During Loeb's tenure as Mayor, conditions did not significantly improve, and the gruesome February 1968 deaths of two workers in a garbage-compacting truck turned mounting tensions into a strike.[8]

King participated in a massive march in Memphis on March 28, 1968, that ended in violence.[8] On April 3, King returned to Memphis to attempt a successful new march later that week. His airline flight to Memphis was delayed by a bomb threat but he arrived in time to make a planned speech to a gathering at

the Mason Temple (World Headquarters of the Church of God in Christ).[9][10][11]

There, King delivered the speech, now known as the "I've Been to the Mountaintop" address. In it, he recalled his 1958 attempted assassination, noting that the doctor who treated him said that because the knife used to stab him was so near to his aorta, any sudden movement, even a sneeze, might have killed him.[12] He referred to a letter, written by a young girl, who told him she was happy he had not sneezed. He used that reference to say,

> I, too, am happy that I didn't sneeze. Because if I had sneezed, I wouldn't have been around here in 1960, when students all over the South started sitting-in at lunch counters. If I had sneezed, I wouldn't have been around here in 1961, when we decided to take a ride for freedom and ended segregation in interstate travel.[12]

He repeated the phrase, "If I had sneezed", several more times, recalling numerous other events and acts of civil disobedience of the previous several years: the Albany Movement (1962), the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963, and the Selma to Montgomery March (1965).[13]

As he neared the close, he referred to the bomb threat:

> And then I got to Memphis. And some began to say the threats... or talk about the threats that were out. What would happen to me from some of our sick white brothers? Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've *seen* the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land! And so I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. My eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord![14]

Assassination

Wide view of the Lorraine Motel and the boarding house from which James Earl Ray fired the fatal shot from a second-floor bathroom window (to the left of the lightpole).

On Thursday, April 4, 1968, King was staying in room 306 at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis. The motel was owned by businessman Walter Bailey and named after his wife. Reverend Ralph Abernathy, a colleague and friend, later told the House Select Committee on Assassinations he and King had stayed in

room 306 at the Lorraine Motel so often that it was known as the "King–Abernathy Suite".[15]

The motel is now part of the complex of the National Civil Rights Museum. The wreath marks the approximate spot where King was shot.

According to biographer Taylor Branch, King's last words were to musician Ben Branch, who was scheduled to perform that night at a planned event. King said, "Ben, make sure you play 'Take My Hand, Precious Lord' in the meeting tonight. Play it real pretty."[16]

King had gone out onto the balcony and was standing near his room when he was struck in the face at 6:01 p.m. by a single .30-06 bullet fired from a Remington Model 760 rifle.[17] The bullet entered through King's right cheek, breaking his jaw and several vertebrae as it traveled down his spinal cord, severing his jugular vein and major arteries in the process, before lodging in his shoulder. The force of the shot ripped King's necktie off. King fell backward onto the balcony, unconscious.[18]

View of Lorraine Motel from window where James Earl Ray fired at King

Shortly after the shot was fired, witnesses saw a man, later believed to be James Earl Ray, fleeing from a rooming house across the street from the Lorraine Motel. Ray had been renting a room there. Police found a package dumped close to the site, which included a rifle and binoculars, both with Ray's fingerprints. Ray had purchased the rifle under an alias six days earlier. A worldwide manhunt was triggered, which culminated in the arrest of Ray at London's Heathrow Airport two months later.[19]

At the time, Abernathy heard the shot from inside the motel room and ran to the balcony to find King on the deck, bleeding profusely from the wound in his cheek.[17][20] Jesse Jackson stated after the shooting that he cradled King's head as King lay on the balcony, but this account was disputed by other colleagues of King; Jackson later changed his statement to say that he had "reached out" for King.[21] Andrew Young, a colleague from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, first believed King was dead, but found he still had a pulse.[22]

King was rushed to St. Joseph's Hospital, where doctors opened his chest and performed cardiopulmonary resuscitation. He never regained consciousness and died at 7:05 p.m.[23] According to Taylor Branch, his autopsy revealed that despite being aged just 39, his heart was in the condition of a 60-year-old man, which Branch attributed to the stress of his 13 years in the Civil Rights Movement.[24]

Responses

Coretta Scott King

King’s widow, Coretta had difficulty settling her children with the news that their father was deceased. She received a large number of telegrams, including one from Lee Harvey Oswald's mother, which she regarded as the one that touched her the most.[25]

Within the movement

For some, King's assassination meant the end of the strategy of nonviolence.[26] Others in the movement reaffirmed the need to carry on King's and the movement's work. Leaders within the SCLC confirmed they would carry on the Poor People's Campaign that year despite his loss.[27] Some black leaders argued the need to continue King's and the movement's tradition of nonviolence.[28]

Robert F. Kennedy speech

That night, Senator Robert F. Kennedy, running to gain the presidential nomination to represent the Democratic Party, spoke about the assassination. Kennedy had spoken earlier that day in Indiana[29] and learned about the shooting before boarding a plane to Indianapolis. He had a speech scheduled there in a predominantly black neighborhood of the city. His press secretary Frank Mankiewicz suggested he ask the audience to pray for the King family and to follow King's practice of nonviolence.[30] Kennedy did not learn King had died until he landed in Indianapolis.

Mankiewicz and speechwriter Adam Walinsky drafted notes for Kennedy's use, but he refused them, using some he likely had written during the ride to the site.[31] The Indianapolis chief of police advised Kennedy he could not provide protection and was worried he would be at risk in talking about the death of the revered leader.[32] Kennedy decided to go ahead. Standing on a flatbed truck, Kennedy spoke for four minutes and fifty-seven seconds.[33]

He was the first to tell the audience King had died; some of the attendees screamed and wailed in grief. Several of Kennedy's aides were worried that the delivery of this information would result in a riot.[34] When the audience quieted, Kennedy acknowledged many would be filled with anger. He said: "For those of you who are black and are tempted to be filled with hatred and mistrust of the injustice of such an act, against all white people, I would only say that I can also feel in my own heart the same kind of feeling. I had a member of my family killed, but he was killed by a white man." These remarks surprised his aides, who had never heard him speak publicly of his brother's death.[35] Kennedy said the country had to make an effort to "go beyond these rather difficult times", and quoted a poem by the Greek playwright Aeschylus, "Even in our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart until, in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God." In conclusion, he said the country needed and wanted unity between blacks and whites, and asked the audience members to pray for the King family and the country, quoting the Greeks again.

His speech was credited in part with preventing post-assassination rioting in Indianapolis, on a night where such events broke out in major cities across the country.[36] It is widely considered one of the greatest speeches in American history.[37]

Kennedy subsequently canceled all of his scheduled campaign appearances and withdrew to his hotel room. Several phone conversations with black community leaders convinced him to speak out against the violent backlash beginning to emerge across the country.[38] The next day, Kennedy gave a prepared response, "On the Mindless Menace of Violence", in Cleveland, Ohio. Although still considered significant, it is given much less historical attention than the Indianapolis speech.[39]

President Lyndon B. Johnson

President Lyndon B. Johnson was in the Oval Office that evening, planning a meeting in Hawaii with Vietnam War military commanders. After press secretary George Christian informed him at 8:20 p.m. of the assassination, he canceled the trip to focus on the nation. He assigned Attorney General Ramsey Clark to investigate the assassination in Memphis. He made a personal call to King's wife, Coretta Scott King, and declared April 7 a national day of mourning, on which the U.S. flag would be flown at half-staff.[40]

Riots

Colleagues of King in the Civil Rights Movement called for a nonviolent response to the assassination, to honor his most deeply held beliefs. James Farmer Jr. said:

> Dr. King would be greatly distressed to find that his blood had triggered off bloodshed and disorder. I think instead the nation should be quiet; black and white, and we should be in a prayerful mood, which would be in keeping with his life. We should make that kind of dedication and commitment to the goals which his life served to solving the domestic problems. That's the memorial, that's the kind of memorial we should build for him. It's just not appropriate for there to be violent retaliations, and that kind of demonstration in the wake of the murder of this pacifist and man of peace.[41]

However, the more militant Stokely Carmichael called for forceful action, saying:

> White America killed Dr. King last night. She made it a whole lot easier for a whole lot of black people today. There no longer needs to be intellectual discussions, black people know that they have to get guns. White America will live to cry that she killed Dr. King last night. It would have been better if she had killed Rap Brown and/or Stokely Carmichael, but when she killed Dr. King, she lost.[41]

Despite the urging for calm by many leaders, a nationwide wave of riots erupted in more than 100 cities.[42] After the assassination, the city of Memphis quickly settled the strike on favorable terms to the sanitation workers.[43][44]

Reactions

On April 8, King's widow, Coretta Scott King, together with the couple's four small children, led a crowd estimated at 40,000 in a silent march through the streets of Memphis to honor the fallen leader and support the cause of the city's black sanitation workers.[45]

The next day, funeral rites for King were held in his hometown of Atlanta, Georgia. The service at Ebenezer Baptist Church was nationally televised, as were these other events. A funeral procession transported King's body for 3.5 miles through the streets of Atlanta, followed by more than 100,000 mourners, from the church to his alma mater of Morehouse College. A second service was held there before the burial.[45]

In the wake of King's assassination, journalists reported some callous or hostile reactions from parts of white America, particularly in the South. David Halberstam, who reported on King's funeral, recounted a comment heard at an affluent white dinner party:

> One of the wives—station wagon, three children, forty-five-thousand-dollar house—leaned over and said, "I wish you had spit in his face for me." It was a stunning moment; I wondered for a long time afterwards what King could possibly have done to her, in what conceivable way he could have threatened her, why this passionate hate.[6]

Garment workers listen to the funeral service for Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. on a portable radio. April 9, 1968

Reporters recounted that many whites were also grief-stricken at the leader's death. In some cases, the shock of events altered opinions. A survey later sent to a group of college trustees revealed their opinions of King had risen after his assassination.[6] *The New York Times* praised King in an editorial, calling his murder a "national disaster" and his cause "just".[46][47]

Public figures generally praised King in the days following his death. Others expressed political ideology. Governor George Wallace of Alabama, known as a segregationist, described the assassination as a "senseless, regrettable act".[26] But Governor Lester Maddox of Georgia called King "an enemy of our country" and threatened to "personally raise" the state capitol flag back from half-staff. California Governor Ronald Reagan described the assassination as "a great tragedy that began when we began compromising with law and order and people started choosing which laws they'd break". Strom Thurmond, South Carolina Senator, wrote to his constituents: "We are now witnessing the whirlwind sowed years ago when some preachers and teachers began telling people that each man could be his own judge in his own case."[48]

FBI investigation

The Federal Bureau of Investigation was assigned the lead to investigate King's death. J. Edgar Hoover, who had previously made efforts to undermine King's reputation, told Johnson his agency would attempt to find the culprit(s).[40] Many documents related to this investigation remain classified, and are slated to remain secret until 2027.[49][50] In 2010, as in earlier years, some argued for passage of a proposed Records Collection Act, similar to a 1992 law concerning the Kennedy assassination, in order to require the immediate release of the records. The measure did not pass.

Funeral

A crowd of 300,000 attended his funeral on April 9.[40] Vice President Hubert Humphrey attended on behalf of Johnson, who was at a meeting on the Vietnam War at Camp David. (There were fears that Johnson might be hit with protests and abuses over the war if he attended). At his widow's request, King's last sermon at Ebenezer Baptist Church was played at the funeral; it was a recording of his "Drum Major" sermon, given on February 4, 1968. In that sermon, he asked that, at his funeral, no mention of his awards and honors be made, but that it be said he tried to "feed the hungry", "clothe the naked", "be right on the [Vietnam] war question", and "love and serve humanity".[51]

Perpetrator

Capture and guilty plea

The FBI investigation found fingerprints on various objects left in the bathroom from where the gunfire had come. Evidence included a Remington Gamemaster rifle from which at least one shot had been fired. The fingerprints were traced to an escaped convict named James Earl Ray.[52] Two months after assassinating King, Ray was captured at London's Heathrow Airport while he was trying to depart from the United Kingdom for either Angola, Rhodesia, or apartheid South Africa[53] on a false Canadian passport in the name of Ramon George Sneyd.[54] Ray was quickly extradited to Tennessee and charged with King's murder.

Ray confessed to the assassination on March 10, 1969. On the advice of his attorney Percy Foreman, Ray took a guilty plea to avoid a conviction and potential death penalty. Ray was sentenced to a 99-year prison term; he recanted his confession three days later.[55]

Ray fired Foreman as his attorney and claimed a man he met in Montreal with the alias "Raul" was involved, as was Ray's brother Johnny, but that he was not. He said through his new attorney Jack Kershaw that, although he did not "personally shoot King", he may have been "partially responsible without knowing it", hinting at a conspiracy. In May 1977, Kershaw presented evidence to the House Select Committee on Assassinations that he believed exonerated his client, but tests did not prove conclusive. Kershaw also claimed Ray was somewhere else when the shots were fired, but he could not find a witness to corroborate the claim.[56]

Escape

Ray and seven other convicts escaped from Brushy Mountain State Penitentiary in Petros, Tennessee, on June 10, 1977. They were recaptured on June 13, three days later, and returned to prison.[57] A year was added to Ray's sentence.

Ray worked for the remainder of his life attempting (unsuccessfully) to withdraw his guilty plea and secure a full trial. In 1997, King's son Dexter met with Ray; he publicly supported Ray's efforts to obtain a retrial.[58]

William Francis Pepper remained James Earl Ray's attorney until Ray's death. He carried on the effort to gain a trial on behalf of the King family, who do not believe Ray was responsible, but that there was a conspiracy by elements of the government against King.[59]

Death

Ray died in prison on April 23, 1998, at the age of 70 from kidney and liver failure, caused by hepatitis C (probably contracted as a result of a blood transfusion given after a stabbing while at Brushy Mountain State Penitentiary).

Conspiracy theories

Loyd Jowers

In December 1993, Loyd Jowers, a white man from Memphis, appeared on ABC's *Prime Time Live*. He had gained attention by claiming an alleged conspiracy involving the Mafia, the Federal government, and himself to kill King. According to Jowers, Ray was a scapegoat, and not directly involved in the shooting. Jowers claimed he hired someone to kill King as a favor for a friend in the mafia, Frank Liberto, a produce merchant who died before 1993.

According to the Department of Justice, Jowers had inconsistently identified different people as King's assassin since 1993. He had alternatively claimed the shooter was: (1) an African American man who was on South Main Street on the night of the assassination (the "Man on South Main Street"); (2) Raoul; (3) a white "Lieutenant" with the Memphis Police Department; and (4) a person whom he did not recognize. The Department does not consider Jowers' accusations credible, and refers to two of the accused individuals by pseudonym.[note 1] DOJ has stated the evidence allegedly supporting the existence of a third assassin, "Raoul", is dubious.[60] Jowers had business interests in the vicinity of the assassination site.

Coretta Scott King v. Loyd Jowers

In 1997, King's son Dexter had a meeting with Ray and asked him, "I just want to ask you, for the record, um, did you kill my father?" Ray replied, "No. No I didn't," and King told Ray he, along with the King family, believed him; the King family also urged that Ray be granted a new trial.[61][62][63] In 1999, the King family filed a civil case against Jowers and unnamed co-conspirators for the wrongful death of King. The case, *Coretta Scott King, et al. vs. Loyd Jowers et al.*, Case No. 97242, was tried in the circuit court of Shelby County, Tennessee, from November 15 to December 8, 1999.

Attorney William Francis Pepper, representing the King family, presented evidence from 70 witnesses and 4,000 pages of transcripts. Pepper alleges in his book, *An Act of State* (2003), that the evidence implicated the FBI, the CIA, the Army, the Memphis Police Department, and organized crime in the murder of King.[64] The suit alleged government involvement; however, no government officials or agencies were named or made a party to the suit, so there was no defense or evidence presented or refuted by the government.[3] The jury found defendant Loyd Jowers and unknown co-defendants civilly liable for participation in a conspiracy to assassinate King in the amount of $100. Members of King's family acted as plaintiffs.[65]

After hearing no evidence from the government, and only testimony and pleadings cooperatively submitted by the plaintiffs and Jowers, the jury—six blacks and six whites—found King had been the victim of assassination by a conspiracy involving the Memphis police as well as federal agencies. Local Assistant District Attorney John Campbell, who was not involved in the case, said the case was flawed and "overlooked so much contradictory evidence that never was presented."[4] This civil verdict against Jowers has been claimed by some persons to have established Ray's criminal innocence, which the King family has always maintained, but it has no bearing on his having pleaded guilty. In the United States, civil and criminal trials are always adjudicated independently.[66][67][68] The family said it had requested only $100 in damages to demonstrate they were not seeking financial gain. Dexter called the verdict "a vindication for us".[69] At a press conference following the trial, members of the King family including Corretta Scott King and Dexter King told reporters they believed the Mafia and state, local, and federal Government agencies had conspired to plan the assassination and frame James Earl Ray as the shooter.[70] When asked who they thought the true assassin was, Dexter King said that Jowers had identified Lt. Earl Clark of the Memphis Police Department as the shooter.[70]

Counter evidence

In 2000, the Department of Justice completed their own investigation into Jowers' claims; it did not find evidence to support the allegations about conspiracy. The investigation report recommends no further investigation unless some new reliable facts are presented.[71] A sister of Jowers said he had fabricated the story so he could make $300,000 from selling it, and that she corroborated it to get some money to pay her income tax.[72][73] King biographer David Garrow disagrees with William F. Pepper's claims that the government killed King. He is supported by author Gerald Posner.[74] Posner wrote *Killing the Dream: James Earl Ray and the Assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (1998), concluding that Ray killed King, acting alone, likely for the hope of collecting a racist bounty for the murder.[75]

The tomb of Martin Luther King and Coretta Scott King, located on the grounds of the King Center in Atlanta

On the other hand, conspiracy theorists bristled at *Killing the Dream*, criticizing Posner for in part basing it on "a psychological evaluation of James Earl Ray, which he [Posner] is not qualified to give, and he dismisses evidence of conspiracy in King's murder as cynical attempts to exploit the tragedy".[76] William Pepper, Ray's final defense attorney, repeatedly dismissed Posner's book as inaccurate and misleading. Dexter King, one of Martin Luther King's sons, also criticized it.[77] In response to the 1999 verdict in *King vs. Jowers*, Posner told *The New York Times*, "It distresses me greatly that the legal system was used in such a callous and farcical manner in Memphis. If the King family wanted a rubber stamp of their own view of the facts, they got it."[69]

Other theories

In 1998, CBS reported the two separate ballistic tests conducted on the Remington Gamemaster allegedly used by Ray in the assassination were inconclusive.[78][79] Moreover, witnesses with King at the moment of the shooting say the shot was fired from a different location; from behind thick shrubbery near the rooming house, and not from a window of the rooming house.[80]

King's friend and SCLC organizer, Reverend James Lawson, has suggested the impending occupation of Washington, DC, by the Poor People's Campaign was a primary motive for the assassination.[3] Lawson also noted during the civil trial that King alienated President Johnson and other powerful government actors when he repudiated the Vietnam War on April 4, 1967—exactly one year before the assassination.[66]

King had been targeted by COINTELPRO[81] and had also been under surveillance by military intelligence agencies during the period leading up to his assassination under the code name Operation Lantern Spike.[82]

A church minister, Ronald Denton Wilson, claimed his father, Henry Clay Wilson, assassinated Martin Luther King Jr., not James Earl Ray.[83] He stated, "It wasn't a racist thing; he thought Martin Luther King was connected with communism, and he wanted to get him out of the way." But Wilson had reportedly previously admitted his father was a member of the Ku Klux Klan.[84]

In 2004, Jesse Jackson, who was with King when he was assassinated, noted:

> The fact is there were saboteurs to disrupt the march. [And] within our own organization, we found a very key person who was on the government payroll. So infiltration within, saboteurs from without and the press attacks. I will never believe that James Earl Ray had the motive, the money and the mobility to have done it himself. Our government was very involved in setting the stage for and I think the escape route for James Earl Ray.[85]

According to biographer Taylor Branch, King's friend and colleague James Bevel put it more bluntly: "There is no way a ten-cent white boy could develop a plan to kill a million-dollar black man."[86]

See also

- "I've Been to the Mountaintop"
- Post-civil rights era African-American history

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Notes

1. Because [The Department of Justice] does not credit Jowers' inconsistent allegations, we refer to the two assassins he has named as the "Man on South Main Street" and the "Lieutenant", respectively.

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